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ABSTRACT

In Iran, English second language (ESL) instruction is increasing rapidly. Generally, the instruction is structural and the focus is on grammatical features. Structural and grammar-translation methods of teaching are most common, and change is resisted. Against this background, however, some college instructors of the new generation have begun to test out the functional approach through research in three areas: Teaching functional controlled writing, translation tests as measures for assessing comprehension of functions in written discourse, and teaching functions in conversation. Results have implications for ESL instruction in Iran, but instructional practice should be tailored to the students' needs. Many high school and college students have limited occasion to use functional language and are not motivated to learn it. However, other learners of English would benefit from functional language instruction. These include translators, translation students, professors and the clergy; in fact, the clergy and the revolutionary young generation comprise the main group of Iranian English learners. Writers of ESL instructional materials should prepare texts containing educated discourse that is relevant to students' subject areas and geared to their proficiency level; this may mean simplification. Iranian English learners badly need appropriate authentic texts, workbooks, and audio-visual materials in which persuasive discourse is taught for the academic, not conversational, context and from which cultural bias is removed. Teaching guides to accompany the materials are essential. (Contains 12 references.) (MSE)

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Feasibility of functional approach to EFL teaching in Iran

B . C . , Vancouver, TESOL '92 Convention

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Beginning with an elaboration on the status of English language teaching (ELT) in Iran, the presenter reports the researches conducted on adopting the functional approach to EFL teaching in Iran. Analyzing the implications of the researches, the presenter then considers the cases where ESL-related findings of the applicability of the functional approach could be directly ciphoned to EFL practices. He also provides some practical suggestions for the preparation of functional materials which can be applied to EFL situations in general and to EFL programs in Iran in particular.

INTRODUCTION

For the last three or four decades, English language teaching (ELT) has been a potential field of inquiry for researchers the world over. They have been aiming at working out a comprehensive approach to teaching English. ELT has in consequence gone through various stages of development. In the last decade, the quest culminated in the emergence of the functional approach to language teaching. The approach was initiated and developed by the researchers and practitioners who were mostly concerned with teaching English as a second language (TESL). To date, nonetheless, the feasibility of adopting the approach for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) has not been fully scrutinized, an undertaking that the presenter has attempted to accomplish with regard to EFL teaching in Iran.

ELT IN IRAN

In Iran, the fever for learning English is on the rise. Official figures speak of about 8 million learners currently learning English as a foreign language at junior and high schools, universities, and private language institutes. The method of teaching English has hardly been affected by the swings of the pendulum and shifts of theoretical fashion in ELT. With minor differences, the whole process of ELT in Iran is structural and the pedagogical focus is, consequently, on the grammatical features of English. The structural and grammar-translation methods are still the vogue. The adherents of the methods, generally, resist any change, slight or otherwise, in their teaching curriculum. Even those who are aware of the pitfalls of the generation-old methods and wish to be innovative in their instruction pay lip service to the current teaching trends and continue with the inveterate procedures with which they feel secure.

Against this background, however, some EFL college instructors of the new generation have

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taken the initiative in putting the functional approach to the test in three researches: Teaching functional controlled writing, translation tests as measures for assessing comprehension of functions in written discourse, and teaching functions in conversation.

In teaching functional controlled writing, the characteristics of the rhetorical functions of generalization and classification were taught to some English majors. The rhetorical techniques and cohesive ties of sample paragraphs were also analyzed in two teaching sessions. Then, the students were asked to write two controlled paragraphs to manifest their ability to use the functions learned. The results were conductive to the point that the functional approach to writing is applicable to EFL writing. (Geranpayeh, 1990)

In the other research (Shahsavandi, 1990), some non-English majors were asked to translate sentences containing rhetorical functions. Correct rendering of the sentences needed cognizance of the intentions of the writer masquerading in sentences containing elements of a given function. It was diagnosed that, for some subjects, deficiency in comprehending the intended function led to incorrect rendering of the sentences, misrepresenting the intentions of the writer. Thus, it is inferred that some knowledge of basic functions of language and of their characteristics is needed.

In the third research, the presenter taught some everyday language functions to twenty English majors, functions like introducing oneself, inviting, and asking personal questions about one's family, occupation, telephone number and the like. To contextualize teaching, the integrative, communicative text *Person to Person* (Richards & Bycina, 1984) was adopted for class use. The functions were first introduced through listening to unit-opening conversations. Then the students were given points highlighting usage and use relevant to each function in question. To maximize the students' opportunities to talk, the whole class was divided into small groups of six or seven.

Against the anticipation, the result was not promising. Although the students had demonstrated enthusiasm in the program which was a departure from their previous old-fashioned practice, their progress was not satisfactory. The main reason was that the functions adopted were not of significance and immediate utility to the students.They failed to represent the students' academic and/or social needs; so the students artificially used them. In real situations they could not put them into practice. Since false situations do not activate and produce mental reactions, a major component in communication, the students' enthusiasm waned. In fact, they were more in need of learning the functions of argumentation and analysis which could be *really* put into practice in class discussion of social and educational issues concerning negotiating ideas, confirming or negating a proposition, expressing an attitude towards a proposition, substantiating a proposition and the like.

IMPLICATIONS

Teachers can take advantage of the researches reported here. English teachers should not be perplexed by the alternating changes of focus of interest in their field. While they should keep abreast of new teaching trends and developments to enhance their knowledge and expertise, they should not blindly follow the dogmas forwarded to them as bandwagons and new fads. Thus, ignorance results in running the risk of becoming old fashioned and fuddy duddy, and blind pursuit in becoming unreliable and fly-by-night. Neither is favored; rather a middle-of-the-roader, a moderator,

is to be sought. One who gropes for new enlightenment, is sure to attain it, and via his own reflection into the issue, endeavors to assess its applicability.

Applying new findings to classroom situations requires needs identification and curriculum specification. Teachers should do this with regard to the objective of the course, the students' linguistic level, and their proclivity, specifying what programs should be planned and how they should be implemented. As an EFL teacher, I should like to identify Iranian EFL learners' basic needs with respect to the objectives of teaching English in Iran. Prior to that, I think, I should specify Iranian English learners. In general, learners-users of English in Iran can be classified into high school and college students, translators, professors, and the clergy. .

Generally speaking, Iranian high school and college students need not learn English through learning language functions. Experience and research, as reported in the third research, show that any attempt to adopt a functional approach to teaching speaking is for sure doomed to failure. There are two reasons to support the conviction. In the first place, with some exceptions, the learners are hardly intrinsically motivated. Secondly, the situation does not arise for them to use English functionally. As a result, it is not worth time and effort to plan a functional syllabus for teaching English to such learners.

However, there are other English learners who are to some degree in need of getting acquainted with language functions: translators and students of translation courses, professors and the clergy. In my estimation, translators and students of translation courses are very much in need of learning language functions. Irrespective of what the target or source language is, correct rendering of the source text requires such awareness. As mentioned earlier, the available research shows that misunderstanding language functions leads to misrepresentation of the intentions of the writer and yields a distorted translation. So what merits consideration and scrutiny is functions specification of the source and target languages and functions analysis of the source text; that is, analysis of what the writer of the source text wants to accomplish through language. Thus, teachers of translation courses should work on materials or sample texts representing various functions and analyze the linguistic characteristics of the functions for the learners.

As for professors, they need English not only as the language of their original academic texts but also as the language needed for presenting their ideas and findings through articles submitted to magazines or conferences. Thus, they should become familiar with rhetorical functions and techniques representative of scientific discourse. Text analysis of such discourse shows that functions such as description, definition, generalization and classification and rhetorical techniques like exemplification and enumeration are frequently used in such discourse.

The clergy and the revolutionary young generation comprise the main group of Iranian English learners. They are by far the most enthusiastic learners. Their objective is two-fold. In the first place, they learn English as a means of reading religious texts, Islamic or otherwise, to enrich their understanding of religious veiwpoints and attitudes. Islam advises them to pursue knowledge wherever and whenever possible so that they may not be skin deep in their beliefs. So, to investigate others' ideas through reading English books, they learn English wholeheartedly. Secondly, they learn English as a means of expressing and codifying their own ideas to communicate with their Muslim

brothers throughout the world.

One of the potential fields of inquiry in EFL lies here. To my knowledge, there has been no research in the related literature on the characteristics of the lauguage of religious discourse in its broad sense. On the whole, religious issues, by nature, need scrutiny and analysis. The most important functions identifiable in such texts are argumentation and analysis. The subcategories of these functions and the notions Iranian EFL learners will be needing in this regard are modality (certainty, necessity, obligation), evaluation (judgment, approval, disapproval)and argument (expressing attitudes, agreement, disagreement, reprobating). The linguistic elements, lexical items, cohesive devices, and the way propositions are dealt with in each of these cases differ. Thus, they should be analyzed for and studied by Iranian EFL learners in need of using these functions and notions.

SUGGESTIONS TO MATERIALS WRITERS

Translating a curriculum specification into materials is as sophisticated a task as that of translating materials into effective teaching. The former is the native materials writers' responsibility and the latter that of the qualified EFL teachers. Thus, although materials writers and EFL teachers are in complementary distribution, I am of the opinion that the latter is of more help to the former in that they cast illuminating light on the situation and subjects of EFL instruction. EFL teachers, however, are of help if, as Medgyes (cited in Rossner & Bolitho, 1990) puts it, they mediate as filters and work halfway between the zealous and the weary, letting the moderate ideas through while blocking the more far-fetched. Thus, on the one hand, EFL teachers should reveal their practical problems, and material writers, on the other hand, should not be oblivious and insensitive to the treadmill EFL teachers' problems and make provision of authentic materials. As a non-native EFL teacher I am making an attempt to give some suggestions to materials writers with regard to the needs specified earlier.

Materials writers should prepare authentic materials for EFL learners. By authentic I mean materials provided by educated English writers so that instances of use are taken into consideration. Materials, moreover, should be relevant to the students' fields of specification and geared to their level of understanding. So, to me, there is nothing wrong with preparing special simplified texts for EFL learners. Otherwise, we should expect the psychological sideeffect of facing demotivated students bogged down in a morass of unfamiliar lexis ans idiom (Swan, cited in Rossner & Bolitho, 1990, P: 95).

Iranian EFL learners are in desparate need of authentic texts, workbooks and audio-visual materials. For instance, there is an urgent need for a book which contains chapters, each of which emphasizes a specific function. The book may begin with a brief explanation of the function and examples of how it might be used appropriately in certain situations. Fortunately, there are some such books exemplifying the rhetorical functions of classification, definition, generalization, and analysis as used in written discourse. The cohesive ties and rhetorical techniques as well as some specific verbs associated with each function are also specified. (see Donald et al , 1987; McKay, 1980 , 1982; Reid and Lindstrom, 1985)

But the crux of the problem lies in the fact that the available communicative textbooks are ESL-oriented. The functions applicable to EFL situations have been hardly worked out. In conversation, mention should be made, the functions of argumentation and analysis and the spoken terms used for negotiating,substantiating or justifying ideas have not been systematically explored. They are, however, of urgent need to Iranian EFL learners who mainly use English not for communicating with native speakers in the flesh but for discussing social or educational issues with their classmates.

Thus, I propose that materials writers prepare written, spoken, and audio-visual materials in which the argumentative use of English is contextualized. Real examples of language use and usage can then demonstrate the function of argumentation properly. Controversial topics, such as pollution, world peace, arms race, over population and the like, can be rendered very well using argumentation as well as analysis. The topics can be contextualized in the form of conversations or reports of panel discussions. Pros and cons of an idea can exchange viewpoints in negotiations, express their attitudes reasonably, substantiate their own ideas and negate others'. The writer can speak through the mouth of the interlocutors, using lexical items and expressions as well as cohesive ties needed for such discussions and debates.

Attached to the main text, there should be an excercise part for class manipulation of the points learned in the text. This part should contain situations that require students to use a particular set of data with the help of lexical items and idiomatic expressions which match the situations. Conversational gambits can serve as an example. They are words and phrases which indicate how what is to be said / written relates to the preceding information. Following are examples of conversational gambits to show reactions to an idea, to disagree with it, to substantiate it, or to justify it:

whent it comes to that	to begin with
and another thing	to give you an idea
all the same	D'you go along with me
I can't help thinking the same	(Richards, 1990, p. 57; Blundel et al, 1982, pp: 90 - 94)

To help non-native EFL teachers enhance their expertise in running a functional curriculum, teacher guides are a necessity. Such guides should include extra information on the textual characteristics of the discourse and lexical items commonly associated with such examples of discourse. Directions for running the class in accordance with the principles of the functional approach should also be included. They establish the rationale and relationship between the guidelines and the techniques proposed.

One word of caution is warranted here. Materials writers should be cautious about the content of materials for EFL courses. Materials prepared for host cultures should be norm-free and devoid of cultural overtones, a sort of international variety of English. The rationale behind the conviction is that there is the tendency on the part of the educated elite and course designers in host cultures that English instruction which has not been acculturated and shaped to fit the country's needs constitues

a threat to national identity. This is the case in Iran too. So, if materials are culturally alienating, they will be met with reluctance, if not resistance. Hence, I suggest that, as Cem and Margaret Alptekin (cited in Rossner and Bolitho, 1990) put it, materials writers "de-Anglo-Americanize" the materials prepared for EFL learners. This is true especially for conversation and reading materials which may potentially be charged with cultural overtones arousing suspicion and reactions among learners.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that some danger of "lack of fit" exists when applying EFL-related findings to EFL practices. Thus caution should be taken when attempting to siphon the former to the latter. It was indicated that cautious and restricted application of the functional approach can be feasible. Needs analysis should be conducted to determine the scope of such applicability.However, research and practice have brought to light the fact that the approach should not be adopted for all EFL instruction in Iran. Some Iranian EFL learners need familiarity with some functions of language appropriate for their own careers. Research has also shown that not all functions of language are of the same value and utility to Iranian EFL learners. The functions they need are classification, definition, analysis, generalization and argumentation, along with their subfunctions and notions. It is also mentionable that materials should fulfill two requirements: They should be (a) norm-free or devoid of overtones and (b)geared towards EFL learners' needs specified by their EFL instructors. Sample texts of this kind characterizing the needs mentioned are still lacking. Motivated EFL learners and teachers, in my estimation, are all looking forward to seeing someone taking the initiative and breaking the ice of writing texts for EFL learners.

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